Management of Stress Among Women Employees in BPO Industry in India : A Contemporary Issue

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Abstract

Industries including BPO was at first somewhat slow in recognizing the significance of the demographic shift. Women made their way into the corporate workforce, but without priority of full development of their talents and rise for leadership positions . But in the past ten years, especially since 2003-2004, Corporate interest has been changed about ' Gender – Diversity'. Initiatives is being taken which aimed at capitalization of ' Female Talent Pool' which is easily available and who are eager to accept the challenge. Globalization of economy have forced our corporate workforce to concern more in winning the 'War for talent' and India's educated professional women are a significant asset that should no longer be undervalued and under-utilized. This paper is based on findings from research studies on Indian BPO Industry. It provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities facing by professional women in India. Changing social expectations both at work and at home have made this more complex. Here discussion is about what changes are required to manage stress among women and what is being done to get the best practices for BPO industry in India . Paper highlights the coping strategies that can be selected to further continue corporate journey to gender inclusion and the advancement of women in the organizations.

Keywords

Global economy, Gender inclusion, Demographic shift, competitive factors.

I. Introduction

Stress is a wide phenomenon as it seems to have universal spread. Stress exists in human beings ,animals and even in metals . Stress is also related with providing quality services to human beings depend upon their stress levels. However, this study is about women stress with special focus on the work stress in BPO sector in India. Many people think they understand stress. In reality, stress is complex and often misunderstood .Our BPO industry has a name for it: BOSS - Burn Out Stress Syndrome., which is seen very commonly among women working in BPO sector. Technological and regulatory changes in the BPO sector in India created a sharp and fairly sudden increase in the demand for female workers, Therefore stress among women employees in BPO industry is a contemporary issue to discuss and to hit upon on elucidation of this problem.

II. Stress

As far as stress is concerned, there is no universal definition of stress. Interestingly, most of the mechanical devices/structures are tested for stress levels in laboratories and manufacturing places for their prolonged life and efficient working. Stress is also related to animals and their efficiency of producing milk or providing quality services to human beings. However the present paper encloses the human stress, the BPO industry in particular. Hans Selye , defines stress in General Adaptation Syndrome which consists of three phases:

* Alarm Reaction
* Resistance
* Exhaustion

Stress has become a major concern of the modern times as it can cause harm to employee's health and performance.

III. Introduction to the BPO Industry

Outsourcing began in the early eighties when organizations started delegating their non-core functions to an external organization that was specialized in providing a particular service or product. Business Process Outsourcing is an industry which we all 'Love to hate and hate to love'. Jobs in BPOs is generally divided into two categories, back office and front office. BPO jobs are fairly well-paid in relative to other sector. At the turn of the millennium, India can be rightly called the foster-child of globalization. The liberalization in 1994 gave an unexpected boost to the ITES/BPO industry. According to the Research firm Gartner the Indian BPO industry will grow into a $1.2 billion market by 2011 and $1.8 billion by 2013. In India, the BPO industry experienced 30-40% average annual growth rates from 2000 to 2008 by (NASSCOM 2009). In the present scenario many UK and US based companies are looking at India, to outsource .The global BPO industry will be worth $230 billion by 2012 and India stands to gain $50 billion of that global pie. So one can say that currently BPO industry is at explosion and number of employees keeps on increasing.

IV. Status Of Women In The IT/ BPO Sector In India

In the contemporary world, women no longer lag behind in terms of career. It has been noticed that BPO is one of the industry , which has witnessed high growth for women and helped them more. However, even today women are expected to do multi tasking. One can say that 'Nature has given women too much power, the law gives them too little' as there is no separate rules (except in case of maternity phase ,that to some extent only) in support of women to fill the gap during their innate responsibilities. Earlier The Factories Act, 1948 , under Section 66, banned working of women in night shifts But later on The High Court of Mumbai in its judgment dated 10th June 1999 passed an interim order allowing deployment of women in Santa Cruz Electronic in the nightshift. The Factories (Amendment) Bill, was introduced by on August 2005, which envisage that the employer ensures occupational safety and adequate protections to the women employed. The owner of the factory has to ensure, equal opportunity for women workers, adequate protection to their dignity, honor and safety and their transportation from factory to the nearest point of their residence. Reports says that BPO industry prefer women, due to more pleasant voice and demeanor when interacting with customers. Thus, technological and regulatory changes in the BPO sector in India created a fairly sudden increase in the demand for female workers.

Recent Data

* Women in BPO companies 50%
* Female participation in the workforce 42%
* Enrollment in higher education 40%

-     Women in IT companies 25%
-     Women employees in private companies 23%

Women and Employment in India at a Glance(Figure obtained from official Government of India and private industry sources.)

But the Dataquest survey reveals that in the career pyramid, women are clustered in the bottom hierarchy. Even the few women who have struggled to reach the status of managers, have not been placed in the vital areas of work, but are found in administration .

V. Stress- Generator Factors for Women Employees in the BPO Industry

Employees of BPO work 24 hours in a day, seven days a week. More often than not , Zealous BPO take on more work than they can handle, forcing employees to work round the clock. Specially in case of working women, situation is worst because her responsibilities are divided in to two parts -Household activities and the Office.
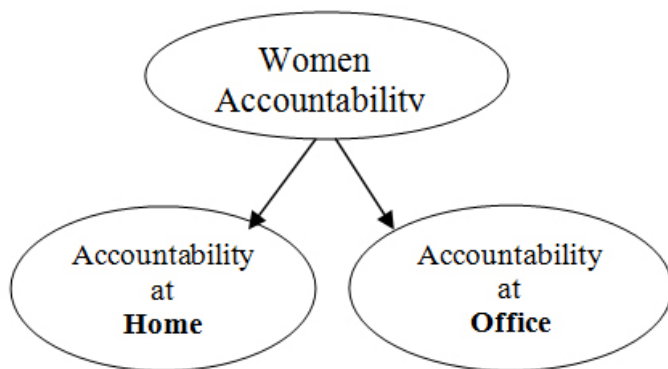

Fig. 1: Women Accountability

Though women have equal emerging opportunity to show there excellence in this field but the following issues act as a Stress -Generator:

A. A Wrong Prejudice about BPO Industry

Working in BPO ?

Our Indian BPO women employees generally face this question from society . Working in BPO for general society means working in Call- centers (where jobs are to make calls to the customers & maintaining customers database), BPO also includes all in-house activities which a company does not want to perform by themselves. It includes maintenance of data base about employees, administration, maintaining software, customer relationship management etc. But due to late night and party type image of BPO, society put this pressure on women and hardly accept this non-conventional women status .

B. Glass Ceiling and Attrition

The term 'glass ceiling' is used to describe a perceived barrier to advancement in employment based on discrimination, especially sex discrimination. It is defined as an upper limit to professional advancement, especially as imposed upon women because women are allowed limited roles in the workplace. The United Nations have acknowledged that women often experience a 'glass ceiling' and there are no societies in which women enjoy the same opportunities as men. In its report, it recommended affirmative action, which is the consideration of an employee's gender in hiring and promotion decisions, as a means to end this form of discrimination. Women only

outnumbered men as public relations managers, financial managers, and human resource managers but not in other field.
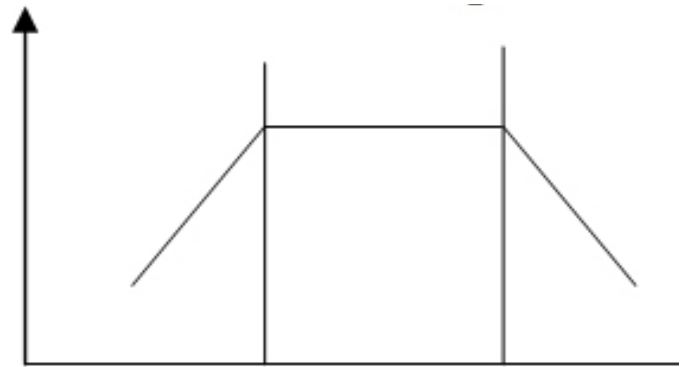

Fig. 2: WomenEmployeesVsManagementInvolvement

NASSCOM-Mercer study on women in BPO which is a six-week study of 40 organizations, with special emphasis on gender discrimination shows, that we are traveling beyond inclusively towards empowerment. The report shows how gender inclusively has its drawbacks for an enterprise. Adequate representation of women in the workforce enhances creativity, productivity and the ability to manage change.2007 statistics shows that more women being recruited at the entry level, but fewer progressing towards the top positions.There is a talent leakage in middle management levels among women in their thirties. Marriage, family, children, relocation and other personal reasons diminish women's ability to reach the top.Support systems are required for women at work. Current measures such as crèches,flexi-time, refresher programs, orientation on company policies only scratch the surface of the real problems. However, there is requirement of increased awareness for the contribution of women and the need to nurture their talent at the workplace as leadership paradigms are changing in the 21st century.

C. Security Problems

The factual scenario of the transportation facility in BPO industry is not unblemished. Acc. to a study in Pune city ,there are about 5,500 cabs engaged in local transportation on about 35,000 BPO employees daily in the city. High profile companies like Wipro, Converges, EDS, Infosys, EXL use these cabs which are not owned by them but outsourced. Background check and references are the weakest link . Officials of Nasscom, and HR executives defend themselves by pointing out the measures they have taken to tighten the security. But still incidents have been occurring frequently which shows the loop-holes in the women security while availing pick-drop facility which fails at late night hours .So, women do not feel secure working in shifts and this is a hassle for them.

D. Gender Discrimination by Employer

In some areas ,classification of jobs are as male typed or female typed. Salary gaps between men and women is one difference in corporate sector, which is generally overseen by the management. Some jobs in BPO sector is mainly male dominated that intimidate women employees. A woman has to put best efforts to prove herself worth for the firm, otherwise ,Gender discrimination can be seen easily in this sector. Somehow if a woman managed to capture an important decision- making position ,she is not entitled for the independent working. Employer do not completely trust on them for the challenging jobs. They only want to make them responsible for administrative or a pre-defined format of job without any liberty

of changes and then this affects compensation packages and salary.

E. Social Constraints and Work-life Balance

Multigenerational living is still common, the usual pattern being that the daughter in-law comes to live with her husband's family, and is expected to be subservient to her mother-in-law. In this family model, women have little autonomy with regards to their personal lives and aspirations. A young woman moves from being a daughter to being a wife and never has a period of time when she is independent on her own. According to Amita Kabuki, Deloitte WIN leader for U.S. India offices, "Despite gaining higher education, historically, Indian women have faced a stressful situation owing to issues of family support for working women, raising children, and home responsibilities. Also due to late working hours women face difficulties in managing balance between work and their personal lives. In recent times, this has changed with families being more supportive and the concept of external child-care centers becoming increasingly popular, in a growing consumer economy.

F. Women perspective

Women themselves support the concept of men as a leader which can not be broken by the women to make a position in the male- dominating corporate world . Some jobs lend a more to gender imbalance (engineering, IT, etc) than others (banking and finance, teaching, etc). However, every woman who chooses her career in either type needs to rise above and firstly destroy this 'mental glass ceilings' she perceives. But challenges are all self-made and to some extent, a creation of what has traditionally happened.

G. An Invisible Barrier to Women's Advancement

Stereotypes affect the experiences of women growth, because our culture equates stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors and traits with effective leadership, and women have to constantly prove that they can lead. These perceptions are even more salient when women try to advance in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as IT and engineering. Gender stereotypes also create different standards for evaluating women compared to their men colleagues. For example, when Catalyst asked senior-level executives in Europe to independently rate the effectiveness of women and men leaders on ten key leadership behaviors, respondents cast women as better at stereotypically feminine 'caretaking skills' and asserted that men excel at more conventionally masculine 'taking charge' skills such as influencing superiors and delegating responsibility. These perceptions inhibit women's advancement because 'taking charge' skills and stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors ,problem solving skills often are seen as prerequisites for top-level positions. Gender stereotypes held by men are especially problematic in occupations where women are outnumbered and men's views predominate. This stereotype shows that women have to work even harder to get their followers to buy into their plans and instructions.

Thus following are the factors responsible for women stress:

- Glass- Ceiling
- 24 X 7 work Pressure
- Prolonged working shifts
- Work- Life balance
- Gender Biasness
- Social constraints
- Security Problem

VI. How these factors affects the women Employees

A. Health Issues

A 2009 survey by the ASSOCHAM reported significant ill health impacts from the stress of balancing a work life of long hours and deadline pressures with daily home responsibilities which still fall largely on the shoulders of women. Hossfeld (1990) offered the 'triple shift' whereby women are involved in paid labor in the formal sector, paid labor in the informal sector, and the uncompensated labor associated with their personal households.. A study (2001) by the Seattle based Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, has shown that women who work the night shift may face an increased risk of breast cancer of up to 60 percent. A survey conducted by the National Sleep Foundation of America shows that women who do night shifts do not just miss out on family time but can expose themselves to medical problems related to lack of sleep. The physiological, emotional and biological needs of a woman are based on a rhythmic pattern of sleeping and awakening. Survey conducted by Dr Gauravi Mishra Consultant, Tata Memorial Hospital, Bombay revealed that smoking among women employees in the BPO and media sector is on the rise. The study conducted during a period of one year on 800 employees between four BPO units, found that 8% of BPOs' women employees were smokers , this new culture has made an adverse effect on the natural reproductive power of the women . Excessive stress and late marriages are the two main reason of today's major gynecological problems among women. BPOs' independent life is providing them an attractive living but is failing to provide them a balanced life.

B. Biological Differences

Major reviews of the academic literature on gender differences find psychological differences between men and women which relate directly to biological difference. However, there are some psychological differences in regard to how problems are dealt with and emotional perceptions and reactions which may relate to their hormones. Women start out very energetic in the morning, but towards evening when they return home and they find that the family too is waiting for her to sort out their problems, that is when she loses her temper. Aggressive behavior of most of the women can be explained by the explanation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis) which is a complex set of direct influences and feedback interactions among the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland, and the adrenal gland which controls reactions to stress ,any disturbance in the HPA axis will cause anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, burnout and irritable syndrome. It is the common mechanism for interactions among glands, hormones, and parts of the midbrain that mediate the general adaptation syndrome (GAS).
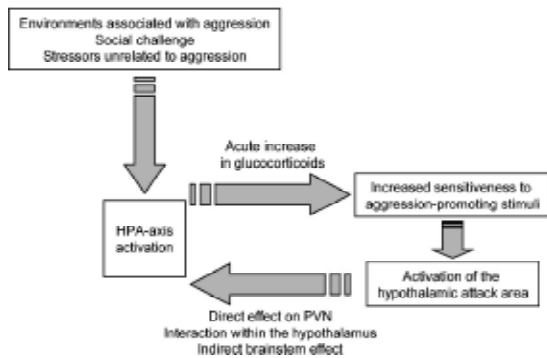
Fig. 3: Graphic Representation Depicting Relationship Between Hypothetical Mechanisms and the Adrenocortical Stress Response.

Studies found that different parts of the brain activate in different gender with performance-related stress, says J.J.Wang, professor, Neurology, Stress responses may be fundamentally different in each gender, sometimes characterized as 'FIGHT or FLIGHT' in men and 'TEND and BEFRIEND' in women. Thirty-two healthy people received (functional MRI) scans .In men, it was found that stress was associated with increased CBF in the right prefrontal cortex and CBF reduction in the left orbit frontal cortex. In women, the limbic system - a part of the brain primarily involved in emotion-was activated when they were under stress. Stevan Hobfoll, et al's in Gender and Coping Model(1994) depict women as avoidant and more prone to depression than men. Thus stress responses are different so, different strategies are required to de-stress and unwind women employees.

C. Question Mark On Women Commitment

Despite a common assumption that equalitarian households are Gender Matters , many women have to sacrifice their career. Work stress could also result in the breakdown of marital relationships. Difficulties are particularly acute for women with child-care. Thus women are under pressure to maintain their work - life balance. According to Sylvia Hewlett, president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, if a woman takes time off to care for children or an older parent, employers tend to see these people as less than fully committed. Brett Graff, Nightly Business Report correspondent states that woman have trouble in re-entering the market or, if she does find a position, it will likely be a lower position with less pay. A women has to struggle with the idea of leaving her career to be a full-time mom. To get ahead in industry , a seventy-hour work week is the new standard. These work hours disturb the work–life balance. And employers put an question mark on women's commitment and their efficiency without considering other responsibilities on her part.

After the study of above factors, one can say ,there are different problems at different stages of a women career which can be enlisted as follow:

Table 1: Problems Faced by the Women Employees at Different Phase of Career

	At Entering phase	At Junior management level	At Middle management level	At Senior management level	At CEO level
Percentage of women	50%-60%	20 % - 30 %	10%- 15%	5% - 10%	2%-3%
Work-life balance	Less	High	High	Maximum	High
Glass – ceiling	Less	Medium	Medium	High	Max
Attrition Rate	Less	Less	High	High	Less
Security problems	Max	High	High	A bit less	Less
Gender discrimination	Less	Less	Medium	High	Maximum
Role conflict b/w office and home	Less	Medium	High	High	Less

VII. Present HR Practices

BPOs have begun to understand the challenge for women to manage both office and home together. Management cannot distinguish in HR practices between men and women except the justification for protecting only women for their reproductive function. Studies suggest that in consideration of women reproductive function, the excessive stress should be continuously disallowed specially for pregnant and nursing mothers. According to M. Orioli, president of Essi Systems, a stress management consulting firm ,no matter how healthy individual employees are when they start out, if they work in a dysfunctional system, they'll burn out. Though now a days organizations are practicing stress management techniques for their women employees eg: Corporate houses h a v e added crèche to their office premises so that children are well taken care of. BPOs like Wipro & IBM have started facilities in their premises of their own private schools for their employees. This will reduce the hassles of school admission. Other facilities like Relaxation from the night shifts, Recreational activities, flexible work hours, long maternity leaves with full payment, provision of short leaves etc have been provided to the employees. NASSCOM, shared the study on gender inclusively that IT-BPO industry has set high standard in gender inclusively. "Women are key and vital part of our workforce, and their participation in the workforce must be seen as a critical enabling factor for continued growth of the industry," said Sangeeta Gupta, VP, NASSCOM. On the whole , the programs and policies whichdifferent corporations are experimenting ,reflects the fact that there can be the solutions that seem to work to lessen the women stress.

VIII. Recommended HR Practice

In the past, women often found it more difficult to maintain balance due to the competing pressures at work and demands at home. But today's women ,if given to the proper chance can manage all responsibility effectively with time and task management and some strategies enlisted as follows:

A. Eradication of the Root Cause : Gender

Egalitarianism

Managers must be given proper counseling and training to change the behavior permanently so that managers and employees can be educated about the origin and consequences of gender stereotype . This training program must be able to guide them and impart skills to recognize biasness and deviation between the oral values and the actual behavior. Such activities are necessary to highlights the causes and effects of gender inequality in the workplace. This would be that first step to change the organizational environment. Education can be the way to reduce the influence of gender stereotypes on managerial judgment. Specialized conferences

must be organized to change the gender egalitarian values and diversity and this will increase the awareness of stereotypes. Organization must implement different programs that help in breaking the barriers to women's advancement including career advancement programs ,new diverse selection panels and performance evaluations schemes whose objectives must be to speed unambiguous environment.

B. Mentoring Programs
Today working women are battling with the concept of super mom and the world's best wife and also same time fulltime career women. But maintain balance between all these roles is a challenge. Thus Mentoring sessions must be designed and run by female heads to advise about time – management at home and office. Importance of time management must be taught to them. Planning and distribution of work is required to finish all essential task on time which can be helpful in stress management . Also, training about to sped up the work is also necessary .They must be told to assign task to other household members to lessen domestic overload which had been traditionally the wives concern in Indian society. The key to work life balance lies in time- management and setting realistic goals. Thus these mentoring sessions will help women about their career growth stability and to reduce stress from their life.

C. Senior Leadership Engagement / Building Women Leaders
Though number of women leaders in senior management has improved in last few years but still some typical connotation of our business society is a barrier for them, because acceptance of a woman leader by Indian male is not easy as traditional mind set which had been cultivated in their behavior since childhood. Thus this is management responsibility to change such environment in the firm and opportunities must be provided to the women to perform as a successful leader. Though professional / leadership skills of women needs to upgrade, thus training must be organized by management , these programs will help women working in BPO to fulfill criteria for the empowerment of women . But Indian professional women themselves tend to shy away from stances that directly challenge any built- in male professional biases as it currently exists. A professional women should never use 'being a Women' as an excuse for failure. Women stereotype mentality that they cannot compete with males in certain fields is an impediment. Women must accept that if they want equal opportunity ,they need to perform equally. Women have natural strength about emotional sensing of the situation and association with the people informally which can be useful in getting willing acceptance of subordinates. Organization needs to create a nurturing environment for women.

D. Career Counseling (Higher education Programs)
Women especially in India have found out that, the good wages they earn through a BPO job help them to experience freedom and autonomy. Management must provide women career-counseling programs and higher education provision along with the job, This will help them to have a definite career path and higher opportunity in their jobs. Such programs will also change their conventional mind set that they are second earning member of family and there is no requirement of upgrading themselves. Large number of women are working in BPO without any clear vision about their goals and future planning. This confusion about their future role in the organization creates inefficiency

and stress. Thus proper career counseling will provide them a clear vision to choose their future role and this will definitely improve their work efficiency and a stress free life.

E. Multiple communication Channels
There must be various internal and external communication channels for the employees. This will help to convey the company's policies about gender inclusion and the empowerment of women in the organization. Small groups must be framed and coordinators or mentors of groups must be designated who can interact with the employees informally and can understand the problems of group members by intermingling with them and this will help employees to distress by sharing their problems and finding solutions.

F. Up- To-the Minute Secure Transport System /Improve social awareness of employees through training and Counseling
Under factory Act 1948 ,Employer is responsible to provide a 'Secure Transport System' .Women who are working in BPO sector bear the pressure about their security during travel in odd office timings. Security of BPO women employees requires a serious attention from management and Industry, Society and the Police. The solution of this problem needs participation from everyone and it needs to be handle not only at institutional level but socioeconomic level Every high profile companies provides cabs which are generally not owned by them Instead of it , they are outsourced. There is no provision of serious background checking . Industry must provide a guard in every cab for female employees and firm can go for small mini buses to make a group of 15-20 people traveling together. Centralized technology can be used to monitor the speed and movement of cab drivers. Inconsistent drivers must be replaced by the agency.
Another practice can be to increase social awareness of employees through training and counseling .A 'code of conduct' and 'Dress code' for the employees must be introduced to avoid provoking dresses. Do's and Don't must be covered under HR policies and clearly communicated to all the employees repeatedly. Counseling programs on the themes on relation at work place, family as social institution, Indian culture, must be conducted to generate a healthy organizational environment. Driver's breath test before and the after duty hours must be organized. Thus new Transport system must be introduced to provide more security to the women employees.

G. Equal Employment Opportunity Policies/ family friendly policies
Stereotypes are automatic thought processes, so organizations may not be able to prevent these processes from occurring on the front end. Instead, they can provide 'checks and balances' to monitor decision-making processes. Wellpoint, Inc, a healthcare company successfully adopted a 'bias safeguard' to prevent bias in succession planning decisions. Their system provides a searchable database of resume information of its top 1400 leaders. These profiles are created by the leaders themselves and then reviewed by their supervisors. From these data, executive leadership can generate summary profiles, produce succession plan reports and perform special queries to generate lists of top candidates. Succession candidates are then presented at 'talent calibration sessions' where teams of executives explain why they have identified specific individuals as succession candidates. Other than this, wage systems must be made more transparent and different component of remuneration should be based on employees eligibility

ensuring that all employees' condition and benefits are equal, such policies must be introduced .Also adopt policies that will make it less difficult for women to simultaneously manage their professional work and their family obligations. Employee welfare and safety policies must measures women-specific welfare and safety needs.

H. Enforcement of antidiscrimination Legislation and implementation of no –nonsense sexual harassment policies

Special cells must be set up and introduced policies and processes that spur women participation, especially at the higher levels of decision- making to make the security and dignity of female employees a priority . Anti-discrimination legislation must be enforced ensuring that women have equal independence and equal access to jobs, provision must be there to educate about punishment under sexual harassment policies.

I. Networking and forums for women

Studies focused on Indian BPO's have found that these organizations are deficient in work place democracy, as employees are not allowed to form unions. It is pointed out that only democratic processes can uncover the problems of crimes and violence. To develop and encourage the participation of women in both internal and external communication, networks and forums are required.

J. Recreational / Cultural program

Recreational activities is more of a fun embodied in the form of activities to refresh ones body and mind .It is an excellent medicine for ailments which cannot be cured by any other manner. Facility like employee activity club ,special telecast of a program in cafeteria, sports tournament, special Friday menu, special lunch arrangements & dinners of good performer of the month with CEO of the firm must be provided by the management to rejuvenate their employees' efficiency. Along with this emergency child care, a private room for nursing mothers and equipment to enable women employee to work from home and remote locations, provision of sick room is also useful.

At every stage ,a woman has to fulfill the responsibilities of her personal and professional responsibilities. Though her professional designation does not change for a long period but her personal life designations keeps on changing. Thus there are requirements of relaxing strategies which can help women to minimize stress from life and increase efficiency.

IX. End Note

The focus on women by the IT-BPO industry is an acknowledgement of their growing role in India's economy. Analysts state that there is a direct correlation between the employment of women and the economic well being of a nation. IT-BPO companies must further refine their policies and processes to strongly influence the participation of women in key leading projects and must identify procedures that can be restructured to encourage participation of women in organizational decision making activities. Companies have to understand the requirement of managing stress among women to make the environment conducive which can retain skilled talented women. Management must provide continuous learning, mentoring, coaching, counseling, opportunities for self development , time management to handle their responsibility at home along with office to encourage them to take higher

responsibilities of onsite projects. BPO companies need to roll out today to give incentives to women workers and make the industry , as a whole an attractive and preferred carrier destination for them.

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Professor Dr. Anil Sarin, a professor of management whose management theory – 'Anil Sarin's Contributory Theory of Existence' has been accepted and published in the Journal of American Academy of Business Cambridge in its March 2009 issue. Dr. Anil Sarin is IMI product , did his PGDM and PhD in Business Administration. He is currently working as Dean, Management Research, Manav Rachna International University, Faridabad, India. He took various teaching assignments with universities including the Central Universities .

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